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Zeynep Isik-Ercan

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As the news of Burma's Nobel Prize winner pro-democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi broke that her 15 years of house arrest ended (BBC News, November 13, 2010), Burma once again made the headlines as a country ruled by a military junta with a suffering economy and political life. As a result of the coup d'état in Burma in 1988, a rapid influx of refugees began to flow into India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Thailand, and other countries (Hlaing 2009). The United States is one of the few countries to respond to this crisis and has admitted resettled Burmese refugees in increasing numbers each year. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) reports that in 2009, 18,275 refugees arrived in the U. S. from Burma, with the majority settling in New York, Texas, and Indiana (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2010). The resettlement numbers for the U. S. situate Burmese refugees as one of the largest refugee communities in the country. The table below shows initial resettlement numbers arriving in Indiana based on the data by ORR. However, the actual number is believed to be much higher due to secondary migration.

| YEAR | 2009 | 2008 | 2007 | 2006 | 2005 | 2004 | 2003 | 2002 | 2001 | 2000 | TOTAL |
|--------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------|
| NUMBER | 1147 | 1150 | 1066 | 193 | 185 | 92 | 24 | 24 | 118 | 119 | 4118 |

Fort Wayne in Indiana is a major city of resettlement for Burmese refugees and attracts secondary refugee migration from other cities for the convenience of concentrated Burmese neighbourhoods despite a less appealing job market. Indeed, families struggle with financial circumstances and unemployment in the recession. Most of the jobs available to Burmese refugees are located out of state in meat factories, or locally in the sewing industry (Indiana's News Center, 2010). While some Burmese in Fort Wayne have family members left in Burma, or in refugee camps in Thailand (Linsenmayer, 2006), others are separated in the U. S. because male family members can only find employment in other states.

While the narratives of adult refugees often find their place in the local media outlets (Maag 2007, Leininger 2010, Catholic Charities 2010), the experiences of refugee children are generally left unexplored despite their significance for educational institutions. As there is a scarcity of literature focusing on the educational experiences of refugees, particularly from underrepresented cultural groups (McBrien 2005), the focus of this article is on the experiences of Burmese refugee children and their parents with early childhood and elementary education in the American Midwest.

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1979) ecological model may serve as a framework to understand the complexity of children's growth and education through the various structures and systems around them. According to Bronfenbrenner, the most immediate and significant experiences a child has in his/her early years are composed of interacting microsystems of families, peers, school, and neighbourhood contexts, which impact children's physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive growth (1979). For

instance, in the Midwest, close-knit family structures and positive interactions with other Burmese children and adults within their apartments or neighbourhoods often create enclaves. This supports young Burmese children to become socio-emotionally resilient, indicating signs of a healthy microsystem around them, despite the fact that most of these neighbourhoods are located in low-income and high crime areas.

Educators in Fort Wayne have long expressed their challenges in reaching out to refugee children at all grade levels and providing the educational experiences they very much need (Lugar, 2010). Refugee camp experience and the scarcity of schooling in camps, even in children's native language, leads to a lack of knowledge among families concerning schooling contexts. Even though the early childhood period has a broad impact on the cognitive development of children, future school achievement and social and emotional development (Reynolds *et al.* 2007, Abbott-Shim *et al.* 2003), Burmese families lack access to good quality early childhood education for children who arrived at a young age (0-5 years), or were born in the U.S.

Moreover, for Burmese refugees – like for any immigrant children –, early childhood education not only positively influences future school achievement, but also may support their adjustment to the host country (Trawick-Smith 2010). For instance, joining schooling contexts at an early age and understanding the cultural practices and expectations in these contexts might help children greatly in their successful negotiation of cultural incongruence later on in their formal schooling and beyond (McBrien 2005). However, for many Burmese refugee parents, it is a challenge to afford early childhood education (Hernandez *et al.* 2008). Financial hardships make it practically impossible to send children to preschools, and subsidized care such as “Head Start” centres can only accommodate a very limited number of children. The young children are, thus, often cared for by parents who are unemployed, or by other relatives.

Low childcare and preschool attendance rates for Burmese children are also attributable to the lack of awareness in the community regarding the importance of early childhood education and the scarcity of bilingual education opportunities. The Burmese lack previous experiences with these types of educational opportunities (Lugar, 2010). When Burmese children miss out on early education, the language barrier persists and remains one of the greatest factors affecting children's social belonging and academic achievement in school. This especially impacts recently arrived Burmese children who begin American schooling in the kindergarten through 3rd grade range; they have missed early English language learning in at the preschool level (Lugar, 2010).

Furthermore, particular aspects of South-Asian cultures influence Burmese refugee children and their families to create dichotomies in their schooling experiences. Ultimate respect for authorities and elders comes up against the concept of earned respect in U. S. society; dependence on family and peers for success contrasts with the promotion of personal and individual achievements; and the prominence of self-control and conformity seems incongruent to the ease with which one communicates own needs in the context of the U.S. (Hickey 2005). Cultural incongruity between Burmese children and their peers and teachers leads to alienation to some degree, especially in smaller towns that lack cultural diversity.

Even less recognized is the diversity among Burmese refugees, since there are many ethnic groups including the Burmese, Karen, and Mon with their own languages and cultural particularities. This is especially the case for recent refugees from Burma, who were ethnic and religious minorities in Burma and faced discrimination there (Burmese Advocacy Center 2010). Burmese refugees also include Muslim and Christian minorities even though the majority are Buddhist. Moreover, cultural differences among different ethnic and religious groups add to the complexity of being refugees from Burma. For instance, some but not all Burmese youngsters are Muslim and fast during the month of Ramadan and attend classes (Sa Ge Dar, personal communication January 10, 2011). Yet, in Midwestern schooling settings, all Burmese children are often perceived as similar by mainstream peers and teachers.

Therefore, while there are a range of factors preventing Burmese children from attending early education programmes, their cultural backgrounds and past experiences challenge them to navigate the culture of schooling. The nature of refugee camp experiences in Thailand makes it even harder for children and families to negotiate cultural norms and relationships in educational and public settings in the U. S. (McBrien 2005; Oh and Van Der Stouwe 2008). For instance, in refugee camps, Burmese refugees typically experience close personal relationships, de-institutionalized procedures for adult-children relationships, flexible scheduling, and informal schooling. In addition, before coming to the U. S., Burmese refugee children are typically excluded from any contact outside of refugee camps for educational purposes. They would not have had any contact with a formal educational system even though teachers and NGO staff in camps are often very dedicated to provide meaningful learning experiences (Oh and Van Der Stouwe 2008). Therefore, upon resettlement, formal processes and hierarchy in educational institutions – such as making an appointment; complex schooling policies that can vary by classroom, building and district; and procedures that require written communication or parent involvement – intimidate Burmese parents in interacting with school personnel (Kyaw (Joe) Soe, personal communication, December 13, 2010).

The implications for policy makers are immense. Financial and language barriers should justify the creation of broader early education opportunities including possible after-school and weekend programmes that are facilitated in collaboration with Burmese cultural community contexts. One example of such a programme is the New Immigrant Literacy Program that Burmese community leaders organized in Fort Wayne. The director, Kyaw (Joe) Soe started this tutoring programme unofficially in 2003 and in 2006 in collaboration with the Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) School of Education. The programme focuses on prolonged relationships with parents and children and is supplemented by community education programmes for parents. With IPFW students as volunteers, the programme has already served hundreds of students (IPFW news releases 2010).

Community education in Burmese language is also needed for refugee parents to become aware of the importance of early education and future educational opportunities for their children. Early education experiences and bilingual educational contexts where both languages and cultural practices are valued will not only contribute greatly to the healthy development of children, but will also facilitate the parents' understanding towards an awareness of the rights and opportunities their young children have. This also aids the adjustment process families go through as a

unit. Policies supporting and providing financial assistance for such programmes are needed and will strengthen the efforts of educators in formal education institutions.

Burmese refugees certainly face many challenges, but opportunities lie ahead of them as well. The biggest responsibility of community and educators supporting them is to create the means by which young children in schooling are able to meet their developmental needs. Those needs are not limited to academic achievement but include interrelated systems around them such as health policies, early childhood education opportunities, after-school programmes, and parent and community engagement efforts. This will contribute to an easier transition for the Burmese to become productive community members and will allow the greater community to benefit more from rich multicultural experiences.

Zeynep Isik-Ercan is a Turkish-American scholar who holds a Masters' degree in Elementary Education and a Doctoral degree in Early Childhood education from the Ohio State University in the United States. Zeynep worked as a researcher and early childhood instructor for the Ohio State University, and Indiana University-Purdue University at Fort Wayne and has worked with teachers and immigrant communities to explore the ways to best serve culturally diverse children.

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